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Laurence Hérault

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# LEARNING FAITH

## YOUNG CHRISTIANS AND CATECHISM

Laurence Hérault. Aix-Marseille Universités. IDEMEC. Aix-en-Provence.  
herault@msh.univ-aix.fr

Opening the door of a church hall where a catechism meeting is taking place is like discovering activities which can conjure up childhood memories for those who have experienced a Christian education. You can see a catechist telling attentive or annoyed children the story of Jesus' birth. You can find another one praying with concentrated, mischievous or rowdy teenagers. You can observe a priest explaining the meaning of the Holy Eucharist to a group of children excited by an approaching communion festival. You also can discover a pastor trying to answer difficult questions simply and openly: 'Who is God's father?', 'Have miracles ever really taken place?'. At first glance, these multiple and varied activities which gather adults and young people in the name of a supernatural being, God, seem quite common and ordinary. Anthropological studies have generally overlooked them, perhaps because of their 'banality', as this discipline has been more interested in the more 'marginal', 'folk', or popular expressions of Christianity. In fact, pilgrimages, worship of saints, spectacular ceremonies of the Holy Week or Christian rites of passage have attracted anthropologists much more than the Sunday mass or catechism. However, these ordinary activities constitute a significant part of the faithful existence and are therefore essential for the comprehension of the Christian experience. Moreover, this so common catechism appears to be an interesting place for those who want to explore religious learning and question the way the contemporary Christian can engage in faith and constitute his or her membership in a Church.

### **Contemporary Catechism: A New Way of Teaching and Learning**

Contemporary Christian catechists often say that their work consists in 'transmitting the faith'. This self-proclaimed definition is quite consensual as it goes beyond the denominational

‘boundaries’. However, the apparent simplicity of the project poorly conceals the complexity of this catechetical enterprise. How can something originating in personal choice, such as faith, be transmitted? How do catechists go about this? What do they do when they claim to be ‘transmitting’ faith? The ordinary sense of the verb, which evokes the transfer of a good, or the gift of something previously received, suggests that catechism consists of handing down religious knowledge to children so that they can be seen as Christian heirs (Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox, etc.). This conception of transmission implies the existence of formal religious knowledge which can be stated, heard, understood and memorized: ‘God created the heavens and the earth’, ‘Jesus has risen’, ‘Mary gave birth to God’s son’, ‘The blessed Trinity is one God in three divine persons’, etc. It seems that such statements have been spread over space and time for millenaries. Being Christian would consist of acquiring such knowledge and believing in it, becoming thus a link in a long transmission chain of multiple statements and associated practices. ‘Old-style catechisms’ were actually based on the memorizing and reciting of such dogmatic assertions in order to train young Christians. The catechism handbooks were presented in a dialogue form borrowed from the first catechisms of the Reformation. The master would put forth questions and the pupil would memorize the appropriate answers. This pedagogic process seemed to be developed in order to teach each member of a particular confession the dogmatic knowledge of his Church and to help him resist against the ‘errors’ spread by others. This presentation of the Christian faith in a dialogue form was continued successfully until the middle of the twentieth century. Many people who learned ‘the highest truths of the Faith’ (Freppel 1875: 4) by heart can still testify to it today.

## Second Lesson

Q. What is God?

A. God is an infinitely perfect spirit, creator of Heaven and the Earth. He is sovereign Lord of all things.

Q. Why do you say God is infinitely perfect?

A. I say God is infinitely perfect because he has all the perfections and his perfections are without end.

(...)

Q. Where is God?

A. God is everywhere

Q. Does God know all things?

A. Yes, God knows all things, sees all things, even our most secret thoughts.

(Freppel 1875: 35)

#### Fifth Lesson

Q. What is the Holy Eucharist?

A. The Holy Eucharist is the sacrament which really and truly contains the body and blood, soul and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ under the appearances of bread and wine.

Q. Is the body of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Eucharist the same body He had on Earth and He has in heaven?

A. Yes, it is the real body of our Lord Jesus Christ, the same body He had on Earth and He has in heaven.

Q. What do you mean by the appearances of bread and wine?

A. By the appearances of bread and wine, I mean whatever appears to the senses; the colour, the figure and the taste of bread and wine

(Freppel 1875: 71).

This dogmatic catechetical programme has proven to be very problematic. In fact, catechists and theologians have criticized it for several decades mainly on three points: the maladjustment of this catechism to the modern-day context, its inadequate vision of the learning process, and finally the amalgam it implicitly makes between faith and belief. The first point takes into account the process of secularization, or rather dechristianization, observed in Western societies. According to those critics, this process modifies, to some extent, the 'catechetical deal'. The 'old catechism' took place in a favourable environment where children came into contact with faith that was very much 'alive' in their local community and their family. Thus this catechism was a way to clarify this faith already present and active for children. On the contrary, contemporary catechism, for the most part aimed at children without real religious references or practices, has embarked upon a new challenge. It must pay particular attention to 'the awakening of faith' and tries to give children their first 'experience of God'. This discovery of God and of

the alliance he proposes to human beings is from now on essential: 'catechism aims at allowing children to come into contact with the God revealed by Jesus Christ and to live in his Spirit' (Lalanne and de Vinols 1998: 19); 'the catechists prepare children to experience this, to recognise themselves as children of God' (Lalanne and de Vinols 1998: 24).

Contemporary catechists, who are aware of the work of the social and human sciences, also criticize the 'old' practice's intention to indoctrinate children especially with its fixed and rigid vision of the roles and places of each participant. The catechist was seen as an erudite, as scholar, an active and skilful master teaching ignorant, passive and flexible children 'what one must believe' in order to be a Christian. Faced with this practice thought to be illusory or aberrant, but especially vain and unproductive, the current theologians and catechists insist on the children's free will and involvement: 'The object of learning is not knowledge, but the personal existence of the participants. The didactic problem does not consist in transmitting knowledge but in working out a procedure which allows for personal reflection and choice' (Baumann 1993: 92)<sup>1</sup>. The pedagogy implemented must therefore 'allow [the children] to express themselves and give them ways to appropriate faith, while rendering them responsible for their choice' (Lalanne and de Vinols 1998: V).

This new formulation of the people's involvement in catechism is also related to the third criticism mentioned above: the tendency to assimilate faith and belief. For the catechists, faith cannot be reduced to truths that one must believe in. According to them, it is incorrect to confuse knowledge of the dogma and personal commitment expected of the faithful. The faithful cannot and should not be confused with the 'believer' as is normally thought<sup>2</sup>. Faith is not an expression which limits itself to religious statements, i.e., which can be defined as repeated information. As de Certeau underlines, when 'believing' is understood as a speech, something which one can hold and/or profess, it stops being that which it fundamentally is. In other words, it is a relational involvement between different beings. According to him, 'believing' must be understood as an ability to make, something which gets to do (de Certeau 1981)<sup>3</sup>. Having faith is not knowing a creed but being able to establish a relationship with God and other human beings; a relationship which is experienced as a revelation, a transformation of the self, of one's life and one's way of

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<sup>1</sup> See also Dubied (1992).

<sup>2</sup> For a criticism of the notion of belief, see, in particular, Pouillon (1979), Favret-Saada (1977), Lenclud (1990), Claverie (1990), and Latour (1996).

<sup>3</sup> 'Le croire se mesure aux liens plus ou moins étroits qu'il entretient avec ce qu'il fait faire et/ou s'attend à voir faire' (de Certeau 1981: 8).

viewing the world. Consequently, contemporary catechism reorients its pedagogy. It refuses dogmatic teaching in order to privilege religious training which offers the opportunity to discover a message which is not simply information but which aims at transforming the individual<sup>4</sup>. The project of the 'transmission of faith' consists thus of giving children the possibility to commit themselves in a partnership with God. They are asked to acquire the specific competence needed for the establishment of such a relational contract.

In order to show how catechists attempt to make this alliance with God understandable and active for the children, I will focus on Communion. The apprenticeship of Communion is, in fact, an interesting situation because of its place in the Christian's life. To live and build oneself as communicant is to live as a faithful person. The Last Supper where Jesus Christ shared bread and wine with his disciples precisely announced a 'new alliance' with God; its enactment during current worship actualizes the personal and collective meeting with Jesus. Teaching children Communion gives them the opportunity to discover hopeful faith. In the following pages, I will compare the training of this sacrament in two Churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed Evangelical Church of Neuchâtel, in Switzerland where I observed catechism sessions over a period of a year in 1997–98<sup>5</sup>.

### **Protestant and Catholic Catechetic Eucharistic Programmes**

The Catholic First Communion is prepared in the third year of catechism (9–10 year olds) and includes an especially adapted 'communion course'. It consists of ten weekly sessions of catechism, two preparatory meetings and a three-day retreat. This course ends with two celebrations: a ceremony of 'First Communion' with parents and catechists and, a few weeks later, a 'Feast of Communion' with parishioners and the children's relatives. In the Reformed Church, the Lord's Supper is presented to all children from infancy to teenage years. Access to the first communion is individualized and can be conducted at different ages according to parents' wishes.

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<sup>4</sup> See also Latour (1990, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank the Fyssen Foundation for the financial support that it provided for this research and the Institute of Ethnology, University of Neuchâtel, that welcomed me throughout my stay.

From an organizational viewpoint, these two programmes are heterogeneous. The Catholic programme appears relatively strong and intense. It is clearly located, taking place at one particular time of the catechism course. It is consistent and well structured, precisely defining the content of the course and the respective interventions of the catechists and the priest. Finally it is intensive, giving the basics in a few months, and also integrated as it is conducted in connection with a first practice of the communion. In comparison, the Protestant programme presents itself more flexibly. It is spread out, being located in multiple parts of the catechetical course. It is adaptable not only to the changing maturity of the children but also to the circumstances of Christian community life (it takes into account, for example, the parochial sensitivity on the matter of Eucharist and can also take place when some 'interesting' ceremonies, baptism or family service, occur). It is also extensive, gradually giving or renewing knowledge and know-how needed for participation in the Lord's Supper. Finally it is independent as its accomplishment does not grant automatic access to the practice of Communion.

This difference in the organization of the Eucharistic learning experience seems to be related to the divergent theologies of the Lord's Supper. For the Catholics, the Eucharist holds a central and fundamental place in Christian life. It is seen as the source and summit of the ecclesial life. For their part, the Protestants relativize the value of the sacrament. Far from being the centre of the Christian life, it rather has the appearance of being auxiliary to the preaching, i.e., it is understood as a useful complement for the transmission of the Word. The theological divergences with regard to the Lord's Supper relate, however, not only to the 'value' granted to the sacrament but concern other dimensions: in particular, the delicate problem of the mode of the divine presence. Both Churches recognize a special presence of Jesus Christ in this sacrament, but they differ about the way He is present. The Roman Catholic theology understands the presence of Christ in the Eucharist as a real presence not only an actual but a substantial presence, a sort of extension of the incarnation. In this view, the consecration Word in the Eucharistic liturgy operates a 'transubstantiation', i.e., a change in the elements (bread and wine). As the fifth lesson of the catechism quoted above says, bread and wine truly become the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Their appearances are not changed but their reality is. The Reformed theology of the Eucharist, particularly Calvinist, understands the sacrament as a sign and denies a true corporal presence of Christ. His body and blood do not come 'to inhabit' the

elements. The bread and the wine which are manipulated in memory of Him remain unchanged during the liturgy.

However, regarding this discussion, the contents of the programmes are not as dissimilar as one might expect. Contemporary catechism does not adopt a doctrinal presentation of this sacrament. Young Catholics do not hear the term ‘transubstantiation’ and do not have any more detailed explanations than young Protestants about the mode of Christ’s presence. In fact, the ways of presenting things are rather similar. Sometimes the same texts or the same expressions are used to evoke the presence of Christ and catechists’ handbooks remind them that the assertion of the presence is more significant than explanations given about the way it occurs.

“While trying to explain the presence of Christ, Christians exhausted themselves and became divided over the centuries. Even though the mode of its presence is inexplicable, inexpressible. It is like a mystery, an inconceivable reality to our spirits which, however, drives us to live. Let us not waste time searching for an inadequate explanation. What is rather expected from us is to proclaim the truth of his presence while letting ourselves be enlightened by the light of the Holy Spirit” (*Agence Romande d’Education chrétienne* 1984, B: 21).

“You should not embark upon a search for explanations ... to know how that occurs ... If you do that, you are on the wrong path (...). What is important is to help [the youths] understand that this meeting occurs in the heart” (meeting for the preparation of the Catholic catechists. 17 February 1998).

This point is interesting because it raises the question of the denominational difference in the current catechetical project. By privileging the discovery of faith, is doctrinal prospect forgotten? In fact, it is really present but not where one might expect it. Furthermore, it provides another window on the denominational divergence. What is learned are two ways of considering the partnership created through the sacrament rather than two disputing dogmas. Therefore, to learn and to understand communion is not to grasp a deep or a concealed sense of the sacrament but rather to grasp the way it is possible to share in it. Two points seem particularly significant here. The first one is the apprenticeship of the Lord’s Supper and, in particular, the relations between the Last Supper and the current achievements of the Eucharist. The second one includes the exercises and rehearsals concerning the practice of Communion.



## **Learning the Lord's Supper's Partnership**

One of the significant things the children have to learn is that Communion is not an ordinary act of sharing and eating. It is also an act which mobilizes various kinds of participants establishing particular relationships between them. This discovery of the specificity of Communion is achieved first of all through a presentation of *two* Lord's Suppers. The first Lord's Supper, the one realized by Jesus Christ the day before his death (the 'biblical Supper') is distinguished from the second one which is performed by contemporary Christians (the 'liturgical Supper').

The importance of the first Last Supper for the understanding of what Communion consists of is obvious. According to Goffman's terminology, this supper provides the primary framework for the knowledge needed to understand or apprehend the current modalized Eucharist. Consequently, catechists present the context of the last meal of Christ to the children and underline the fact that it announces his death and his resurrection. Thus, it constitutes one of the main signs of the new alliance established with God through Jesus Christ. This is not only taught through 'informative' statements but also appears in the ways the 'biblical Supper' and the 'liturgical Supper' are presented to the children.

First of all, during catechism sessions, 'the biblical Supper' is always presented in a narrative form. It can be read, often several times, told by an adult or presented as a movie. However, it is never performed by children. This is surprising in the context of catechism where stage performances of New Testament episodes are an appreciated pedagogic tool for memorizing and understanding biblical accounts. In the case of the Eucharistic teaching, I did not find any such stage performance in the observed sessions or in the handbooks used by the catechists.

In contrast with the 'biblical Supper', the 'liturgical Supper' is never read or told to the children. They observe, experience, or even perform it. Direct personal contact with this Lord's Supper is significant. So much so that a Protestant handbook stresses the fact that children must be taken to observe and to participate in such a cult before attending a gathering where Communion will be presented, if they have never attended a service with Communion before

(Agence Romande d'Education chrétienne 1984, C: 3). This teaching method best underlines the relationship between the biblical Last Supper and the liturgical Lord's Supper. The first is and should be only a 'narrative', whereas the latter is and should be only a 'performance'. In other words, one is presented as a definitively closed historical event, the other as a recurring ceremony. This difference is underlined here in order to make the children aware of the fact that participation in Communion is not a stage performance of the last meal of the Christ but a performance of the Lord's Supper. The faithful do not mimic what Jesus did, but re-enact it. This fundamental dimension is developed by working with the participants about their role and their place.

From one event to the other, these participants differ. In the 'biblical Supper', there are three types of participants: Jesus Christ, the apostles and the food (bread and wine). In the 'liturgical Supper' these are Jesus, the faithful and the elements (bread and wine). Learning about the Eucharistic aims not only at establishing a bond between these participants but especially stresses their presence within both frameworks. A first link is established, by delegation, between the apostles and the faithful. The twelve apostles were Christ's first faithful followers. When Jesus addressed them, he was also addressing the contemporary faithful. The children have already mastered this identification between Jesus' fellows and current Christians, so it is not underlined in the learning sessions. Christ's presence in the first Supper is thought of as a historical fact that the Bible testifies. His presence in the 'liturgical Supper' seems a priori more difficult to apprehend because of his 'double nature'. The question is not only of introducing a historical personality in a current context but also of a supernatural being in an ordinary situation. To understand what this insertion is like, one has to remember that present-day communions are modalizations, i.e., non-literal actions literally accomplished. The interest of these particular acts lies in this space of transcription as Bateson has shown in his analysis of play as fiction. It is possible to use this analysis, like Piette (1997, 1999) did to understand the subtlety and the productivity of the divine presence in the Eucharistic liturgy. Basing his argument on the capital character of the '*not really*' highlighted by Bateson concerning playful biting, Piette shows that the presence of the Christ stated by theology is 'a presence of Jesus that is not presence and an absence that is not absence either' (1997: 144). In other words, Jesus is present and absent at the same time. The participation in the Lord's Supper, which the children must do, thus requires the understanding of this particular dimension of the Communion, i.e., the

non-literal reality of the interaction with Jesus Christ. This constructive and fictional dimension of the ceremonial framework leads to a specific learning process of the divine presence where the reality of this one is not connected to a particular operation that is 'rationally' explainable but to the importance of the Word and to the agency of the Eucharistic elements.

In a Catholic session, the catechist read a text where children learned that in the Eucharist there is '*nothing magic, nothing mechanical, nor electronic*', that this presence is like that of love: '*love isn't visible if I don't make a gesture or say a word*'. Then she concluded by saying: '*we cannot explain everything, it is a mystery*' and recalled the promise made by Jesus:

Catechist: '*Is Jesus present when we are here?*'

Several: '*Yes!*'

Catechist: '*Yes. We have read the Word: whenever two or three [people] come together in my name, I am there with them*'.

In a handbook used by Protestant catechists the same idea is found: 'if children ask you questions about the mode of the presence, you should not panic (...) do not avoid telling them that many attempts have been made to explain this, but all were unsatisfactory because this presence is inexplicable. The only way of answering is to say that God stands by his promises' (*Agence Romande d'Education chrétienne* 1984, B: 26).

Concurrently, the uselessness of the ordinary senses to apprehend the divine presence is frequently and variously stated. Jesus cannot be seen, heard, touched, or even tasted even though he is there. In one session, for example, the catechist gave non-consecrated hosts to the children with instructions on the way of eating them. While the children expressed their feelings, the catechist pointed out: '*when you receive the bread during the Lord's Supper, it has the same taste, but you will know that it is Jesus*'. In a later meeting, the priest also underlined this point: '*when I say the words, it is the Christ but the taste does not change. We know in our hearts that it is the body of Christ*'. This Catholic teaching obviously refers to the conception of the real presence peculiar to this Church but does not appear, however, as a clarification of the Catholic dogma. One can see that as soon as the teaching mentions the body of Christ it refuses to go into the details. Consequently what is taught is less the idea that the host is truly (and really) the body of Christ than the idea that the host is the object which certifies this presence and reveals its

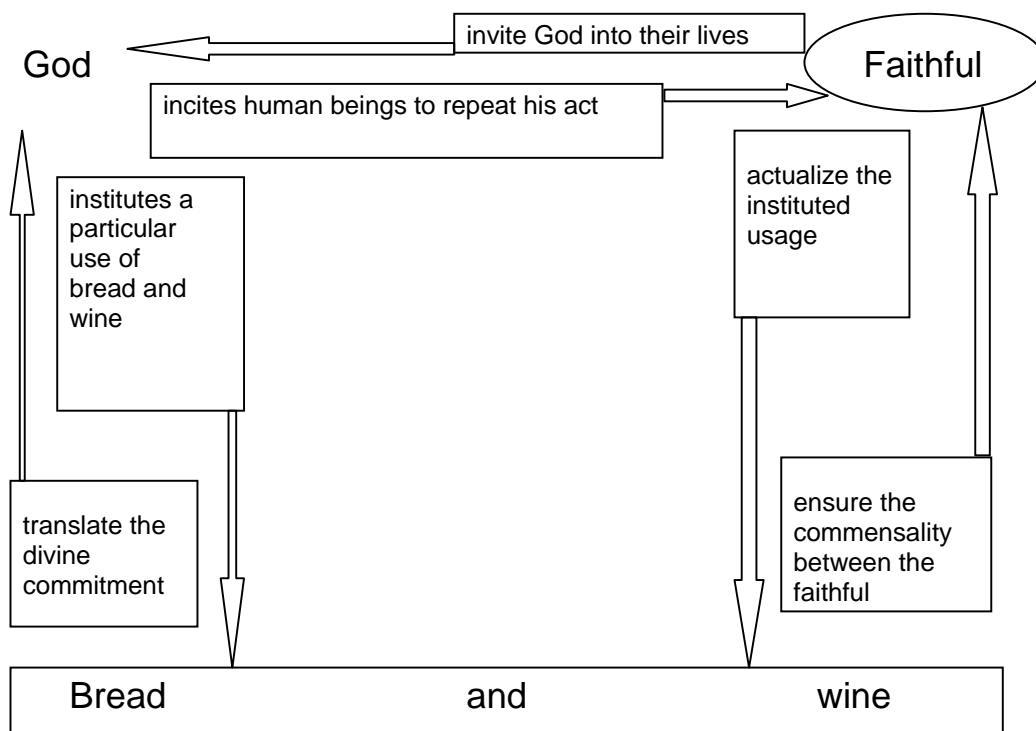
particular content. In this sense, the Catholic learning is not very different from the Protestant one. Both insist upon the fact that the bread and wine testify to the presence-absence of Christ. Significant work is, moreover, developed about the agency of these objects which attest that Christ is present *and* absent at the same time.

Ordinary presences-absences are recalled in order to underline the mediating role of these objects. In a Catholic meeting, the catechist asked the children to try to remember the absence of one of their close relatives or loved ones and how they coped with that experience. Several underlined the void they felt and how they maintained the presence of the absent one: '*my father was always in my heart*'. For others, pyjamas or pictures ensured the delegation. From these accounts, objects '*which make us think of Jesus*' were sought. The Bible, the cross and also the bread and wine were found. In a Protestant session, a poster representing a blurry figure of Jesus holding a clear cup of wine and loaf of bread was shown. The visibility of bread and wine was underlined by the catechist in order to show the children that they are the guarantee of Jesus' presence. This guarantee is obviously due to the way Jesus initiated the use of these foodstuffs during the Last Supper. Like the presence of ordinary 'absents', the divine presence shows itself through objects which Jesus had himself chosen to testify to his role in the alliance between God and human beings. In fact, the agency of these elements is so essential that bread and wine have an important place in all catechism sessions. They are always present and used in one form or another: pictures are exposed on walls or presented as jigsaw puzzles; individual or collective drawings are made during the session; hosts are tasted; a loaf of bread and a wine cup or bottle are presented on the table; sometimes bread is even kneaded and grape juice squeezed with the children.

These two elements are also very closely associated with the *institution narrative*. For example, in a Protestant course, the first meeting included a reading of the account of the Last Supper in front of an already set table (tablecloth, loaf of bread and bottle of wine). During the second meeting, the same reading was done while some children put bread and wine onto the table. In the third meeting the reading and the setting of the table were repeated but in a more solemn way (enacted roles, procession, etc.). Through this *mise en scène*, the bread and the wine handled by Jesus and instituted as revelations of himself ('this is my body, this is my blood') are identified with the bread and the wine manipulated by the children. In this way, the young

Christians learn that bread and wine ensure the link between the inaugural Supper and the subsequent ones.

Through these various procedures, catechism sessions draw attention to the fundamental differences *and* similarities between the two Suppers. Beyond a simple focus on the mode of the divine presence, the participants in either Lord's Supper are not only specified but connected to each other. What is thus presented to the children is a first draft of these partners' relationships. Jesus institutes a particular use of bread and wine (to break, share and eat) and incites human beings to repeat His act ('do this in remembrance of me'). Bread and wine translate the divine commitment ('this is my body given for you') and ensure the commensality amongst the faithful. People who gather in the name of Jesus actualize the instituted usage and invite God into their lives.



*Figure 1: The Eucharistic partnership*

With this partnership, each participant acquires a new status and new relationships are set into place. God is presented as Lord and Father. Human beings who are faithful, show themselves as children, as brothers and sisters. Foodstuffs which are ‘transformed’ into Christ’s body and blood become the guarantee of an alliance. Learning Communion is learning how to commit or bind oneself in such a relational network, how to find a place in it and experience the encounter with God. In order to experience that and their faith, the children must also learn the conditions of felicity of this Eucharistic relationship. In other words, they learn to understand their role and acquire the necessary competence needed to be faithful.

### **Practising Communion: Learning to Master Ritual Action**

This learning experience takes place mainly through exercises and rehearsals of the Eucharistic act and in particular through a comparison between the genuine Communion and the ‘training’ or ‘practice’ Communion. In both Churches, exercises where children handled the bread and wine were observed. They take place both in catechism sessions and in rehearsals preceding celebrations intended for children<sup>6</sup>. The aim of these rehearsals is to ensure that the children master their role. Priests, pastors and catechists train children in situ and give them a series of instructions and rules related to the actions they take part in. For instance, they may repeat processions in the church, songs, prayers, readings, Communion and all liturgical sequences.

Regarding Communion, the exercises of the Eucharistic gestures are carefully differentiated from the genuine Communion. Careful attention is made to point out this difference to the children. The catechists not only insist upon the place where the acts are performed (for example common room vs church), but also on the way liturgical actions are accomplished (they are split up into small sequences and repeated several times with many interruptions). This particular treatment of liturgy is done not only in order to train the children but also to make the words and actions completely inoperative or ineffective. The first significant element of this treatment is, in fact, the exclusion of the divine actor from the exercise. This

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<sup>6</sup> For Catholics, this is the First Communion. For Protestants a special service is centered on Lord’s Supper where children can receive Communion.

exclusion is carried out through the fragmentation of the Eucharistic actions and the nonperformance of the prayers where the divine action is required. In a Protestant rehearsal, for example, the *institution narrative* was present but without the prayers which usually accompany it (in particular anamnesis, memorial, epiclesis). The pastor pointed out this absence to the children: *‘during the service, I will say the prayer to invite the Holy Spirit’*. Moreover, he did not train the children to make the gesture of the Communion. In the Catholic rehearsals, the presentation of the offerings at the altar (offertory), the distribution and the eating of hosts were present but without the associated prayers, in particular without the Eucharistic prayer, i.e., the prayer of Thanksgiving and consecration of the elements, which normally comes before the communion. The consequences of this absence were implied when the priest underlined the effect of the words of consecration for the children: *‘when I say the words, it is Christ’* (so now it is not).

This exclusion of the divine is obviously fundamental because it reveals the significant role of the supernatural being. He is the author of the Last Supper and the main actor of the Eucharist. The actions performed can be regarded as a Eucharist only when He is invoked, when one asks for His presence, when one repeats the words which He pronounced on the eve of His death. Without the repetition of His institution act and without His renewed presence there is no Communion; only a rehearsal. This absence and its consequences are not only explored in rehearsals but also in previous catechism sessions. The Catholic course of Communion included a meeting where the children tasted non-consecrated hosts. The person in charge of the course put particular emphasis (with the catechists) on the contrast between the two ‘types’ of hosts. *‘You must make the difference carefully, but often the children do it easily’*. In fact, at the sight of hosts presented in a cup, the children were delighted and several immediately underlined that they were different from those used during the mass: *‘they are false’*, *‘they are not blessed’*. Another one asked: *‘is it cardboard?’*. Underlining the children’s observations, the catechist explained, *‘the priest didn’t make the prayer for the Spirit to come’*.

In rehearsals, we can also observe the way children learn to constitute the ritual nature of bread and their own involvement in the ritual action. The Eucharistic bread is not only the guarantee of the divine presence because of its institution by Jesus but also because, in the Lord’s Supper, it is different from ordinary bread in its form and/or in its use. The children have to acquire the ability required for this extraordinary use. Young Catholics have to master a

particular object, the host, and all young Christians are asked to handle and properly ingest bread and/or wine in order for these to be seen as signs of the alliance with God. The young Catholics are thus generally invited to taste the host beforehand. In the course observed in Neuchâtel, when the children tasted the host, the catechist invited them to express their feelings. *'It's like plastic but even so, it's good, it's digestive'*; *'It's a bit strange, it's not real bread, it's crusty'*; *'It's good, I like it. It's like candy sheets'*; *'I like it and I don't. The taste is good but it's kind of like dough'*; *'when it melts, it's pasty'*. The catechist asked whether they are disappointed and two boys said they were. In order to underline the difference with ordinary bread, she then inquired: *'can we live on that?'*. Patrick, one of the disappointed boys, answered to the point: *'if I had to live on that for a whole day, I'd just die!'*.

During the retirement preceding the first Communion, more elaborate training of the Eucharistic gestures takes place especially during the rehearsals of the ceremony. The priest oversees the learning of these gestures (teaching the children exactly what they should do): *'I will show you how to receive the bread. Normally, except for left-handers, you receive the bread in the left hand.* [he puts his left hand over his right hand and children do the same] *Don't hold your hands like this* [he brings his hands on the level of his thighs], *that would mean: 'I don't want it'. Nor in top like that* [he puts his hands above his head], *that would mean: 'I don't know what is happening to me'. Put your hands at the level of your heart and they shouldn't be stiff'*. The children put their hands in position and the priest goes among them to correct their gesture: height, suppleness of the arms, etc. The exercise is then repeated with hosts and the priest corrects them once again: *'don't raise your hands in advance. You must keep your hands together. The gesture is important because that helps you understand what you are doing'*.

Protestant children do not have to discover the taste of a special bread (the host) because ordinary bread is split and shared by the minister during the Lord's Supper. Moreover, if the situation of Communion is often present in catechism sessions, catechists do not always train children to make Eucharistic gestures but only tell them how to perform them. It seems that when bread and wine are used in a session, they are handled in order to avoid the complete Eucharistic sequence (breaking, sharing and eating). For example, in a previously described session, a whole loaf of bread and a corked bottle of wine were brought to the table and manipulated several times but neither shared nor eaten. In another session, the usual liturgical unfolding was reversed: the loaf was cut up into slices beforehand and given to children at the



beginning of the session. Then catechists asked them to reassemble the loaf like a jigsaw puzzle. Sometimes, however, there is a genuine training of the Eucharistic gestures. A pastor told me that when she prepares children for Communion, she shows and makes them experience some ways of receiving the bread and drinking from the cup. However, she does not distribute either bread or grape juice. She emphasizes the gestures where the communicant receives the bread (with one hand or with both forming a cup where the minister puts the piece of bread) and discourages those gestures where he takes the bread from the hands of the minister (gesture observed among adult communicants). Regarding the grape juice, she stresses that they must drink only a small quantity. The significant element here seems to be that the children understand well that the Eucharistic use is one which does not only connect the handling and the consumption of the bread *and* the wine but which moreover must be *complete* in order to be recognized as such.

The difference observed here between Protestants and Catholics has less to do with the elements consumed (host vs bread and grape juice) than the specific role of the faithful during Communion. Although the Catholics tend to pay particular attention to the correct handling of the host, it appears that the reality of the Communion act resides less in the appropriate gestures than in the very nature of the host. The multiple regulations and corrections of the Eucharistic gestures show that the faithful (like Jesus) *produce* the host. At the same time, this production appears secondary. The reality of the Eucharistic act does not result from a correct communicant's performance but rather from the nature of the host. Children learn, in fact, that the host's state makes the communicant. When they eat non-consecrated hosts, they are training. When they take consecrated ones, they receive Communion whatever the quality of their performance. For the Protestants, the state of bread is also different during the training sessions and the genuine Communion. This difference is, above all, due to the faithful. The bread of catechism is the whole loaf while the bread of the Lord's Supper is broken and consumed. Here, the difference between exercise and Communion is determined by human action. In the first case, children do not make the gestures or if they do, they perform them with empty hands. In the second, they perform them entirely. Young Catholics learn that to receive Communion is to ingest a consecrated host (and vice versa). Whereas young Protestants learn that to receive Communion is to break, share and ingest bread and wine (and vice versa). This difference

between Protestant and Catholic training is fundamental. At this point, the specific denominational apprehension of the Communion is determined.

According to the way the partnership is defined, each participant takes an equal place and role in Eucharist. Each one takes part in the constitution of the relationship and shares in the production of the other ones as partners<sup>7</sup>. However, the apprenticeship of Communion shows a hierarchical collaboration. First, in both Churches, children learn that the author and the main actor of the Lord's Supper is Jesus. Without His act of institution and His renewed presence, there is no Communion. When God leaves the scene, there is no Eucharist. On the other hand, the roles of the other participants are taught in different ways in each Church. The importance of their respective involvement is, to some extent, reversed. Catholic exercises suggest that the main actor, next to God, is the host, as rehearsals, although rigorous, minimize human competence to the benefit of the host. In other words, even if a child adequately handles a piece of unleavened bread this does not make it the body of Christ. But the state of the host, consecrated or not, draws the boundary between the communicant and the non-communicant. Protestant exercises seem to indicate that faithful hold the second role. The child who is training should not perform the necessary gestures completely because to perform them adequately and totally already signifies that he receives the Communion. In the Catholic training, human action is minimized in such a way that the Christian seems to be the passive beneficiary of the actions of his partners, God and the host. In the Protestant initiation, bread and wine are the passive matters; ordinary commodities of the divine intention and of the human projects rather than genuine partners. In this sense, what the catechists teach children is a hierarchical mastery of ritual action rather than a belief or a non-belief in transubstantiation. This teaching shows us that it is less important to know how the divine presence occurred in Eucharist than to understand the specific register of the roles which a Church imposes and proposes to the faithful and to the liturgical objects. The dogmatic divergence which usually focuses on the mode of God's presence, appears here rather through a differentiated learning regarding both the human involvement and the role of objects in ritual action. Are communicants the producers or the receivers of the Eucharistic action? Are the Eucharistic bread and wine regarded as partners? This understanding of the control of the action is essential for the *felicity* of the Eucharistic act

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<sup>7</sup> Latour's sociology of the 'factisches', which explores another definition of action, could be used here insofar as each participant '*fait faire*' to the others what it will become. Cf. in particular Latour (2000).

but it broadly relates to the involvement, expected and hoped for, of the children, in faith. The contemporary project of transmission of faith which neglects all dogmatic teaching does not dissolve the denominational particularities. On the contrary, it puts them at the centre of the partnership that Christian children are invited to establish with God.

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